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SUBJECT: ABECHE: EASTERN CHAD HUB FOR THE UN, NGOS AND ANY
PKO FORCE SENT TO CHAD

¶1. (u) Summary. Abeche is the major city in eastern Chad, used as a hub by the UN agencies and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that work in the region. Security remains an issue, with the UN still drawn down to essential personnel only (Phase IV)). UN and NGO staff favor a strong UN force, even though its presence would likely increase their costs of operating in Abeche. End summary.

Background

¶2. (U) Abeche is the principal city in the East, and the fourth largest city in Chad. Its population in 1993 was 54,628 (Note. There has been no city census since then; however, extrapolating based on an annual 3.1% growth rate, the population now would be about 83,800. End note). It has a national museum and two modern campuses. Abeche's history goes back hundreds of years, and it became the capital of the Ouaddai Sultanate in the early 19th century when the former capital ran out of water, remaining the capital until the French arrived. Today, water and electrical utilities are very spotty. Overall, Abeche is an undeveloped city with little infrastructure, located in the rugged Sahel.

¶3. (U) No refugee or IDP camps are located in or near Abeche itself, but it is the administrative and logistical hub for humanitarian activities in eastern Chad. If the UN does establish a peace-keeping operation (PKO) for eastern Chad, it would most likely be headquartered in Abeche as well.

¶4. (SBU) Abeche has a paved 10,000 foot runway just north of the city. The airport houses an Chadian National Army (ANT) helicopter detachment, a French military detachment of over 200 personnel, and the aircraft that fly around eastern Chad transporting UN and NGO staffs, and their many visitors. Due to problems obtaining visas and permission to enter Sudan and go to Darfur, many visitors transit Abeche instead, on their way to visit Darfur refugee camps in eastern Chad. Visitors in the last few weeks included the UN Human Rights Commission delegation that was refused permission to enter Sudan, UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Mia Farrow and UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie, as well as a former French prime minister and a French author.

Security in Abeche

¶5. (SBU) Although Chadian rebels did briefly occupy Abeche last November, most UN and NGO staffers there think it unlikely that it will be attacked again. There is a sizable

ANT garrison in the city, and there are often attack helicopters at the airport. In addition, most interlocutors believe that the rebels are weaker now than they were several months ago.

¶6. (SBU) However, Government of Chad (GoC) capacity is weak.

One interlocutor estimated that there are eight to ten murders each month in Abeche, usually committed by the ANT. The ANT is not well-disciplined, and some soldiers harass locals, who are afraid of them. There is no functioning judicial system and therefore no serious investigations or criminal trials. There is also the perception that the GoC is not spending any development funds in eastern Chad (actually, not outside of Ndjamena itself). At the same time, there are also many heavily armed Sudanese rebels in the city wearing similar uniforms. It's not clear if the authorities know or care about their presence.

Security in Eastern Chad

¶7. (SBU) The UN remains in Phase IV security posture in eastern Chad (only essential personnel allowed to remain). At the refugee and IDP camps, only a fraction of the UNHCR staffs are present. Most NGOs follow UN guidelines and are also at minimum manning. The UN and the NGOs all have curfews for their staffs, with some as early as 5:15 p.m. However, one NGO, Oxfam, returned to Phase III about four weeks ago and has increased its staff out east.

¶8. (SBU) There are serious security concerns in eastern Chad, especially southeast of Abeche, due to either rebel activity or simple bandits, and all travel has to be cleared daily with the UN security officer in Abeche. He reported that one day about two weeks ago was exceptionally quiet, so

the UN took advantage of that to stage as many ground convoys as possible that day. While most interlocutors did not think the rebels were strong enough to attack Abeche again, no one discounted their ability to make harassing attacks anywhere or to carjack SUVs.

Effects of a UN Peace-Keeping Force

¶9. (SBU) All UN and NGO staffers questioned wanted a strong UN force deployed as soon as possible, with the mandate to protect refugees, IDPs, and humanitarian workers, due to the current security situation. Most hadn't considered the issue whether such a force would be perceived by Chadian rebels as being pro-GoC, but those that had considered it a definite possibility. Interlocutors were aware of the logistical and manpower requirements outlined in the Secretary General's most recent report (from obtaining water to finding 800 Chadian gendarmes), and privately do not think a force is feasible on that scale.

¶10. (SBU) One side effect of a PKO would be its effect on Abeche itself. The airport tarmac is already crowded (Emboff observed 11 aircraft on the tarmac at one point, including a French C-160 Transall, a French helicopter, an ANT attack helicopter, plus the various UN, NGO, and transient aircraft).

¶11. (SBU) Housing prices in Abeche are already highly inflated. One room of a three bedroom house in western Abeche could be sub-let from the German agency, GTZ, for approximately USD 100 per month, plus USD 24 to help pay for the guards, and some amount to help pay for generator fuel (most residences do not run generators during the day, just at night). A new three bedroom house being built between the airport and the UNHCR compound was asking in the range of USD \$1,000 per month. There are new houses under construction. By comparison, lodging at a UNHCR guest house (where Emboffs usually remain overnight) costs approximately USD 27 per night. However, the insertion of a large PKO, headquartered in Abeche, would drive real estate prices up significantly, making it more expensive for UN agencies and NGOs to operate

there. The resulting increase in visitors would also at the same time make it more difficult to obtain UNHCR guest quarters. Assuming the force's presence led to the reinstatement of Phase III, then even more UN and NGO staff would return to Abeche, adding to the housing congestion.

¶112. (U) On the other hand, it might stimulate the local economy in other ways. The current UN and NGO international population does not appear to be big enough to have created any businesses catering to them, such as western-type markets, souvenir shops, restaurants or internet cafes. While a PKO force here would boost local employment, the drawback is that it would cause an inflationary effect on food prices, which would adversely affect the local population.

Comment

¶112. (SBU) Abeche will remain the hub for the UN agencies and NGOs serving in eastern Chad. If a UN PKO does deploy there (currently blocked by President Deby), it will be welcomed by the UN and NGOs, but will compete with them for airport tarmac space and the renting of housing and office compounds.

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